



# The Monroe Minute

## Nicodemus and the Settlement of African American Communities In Kansas

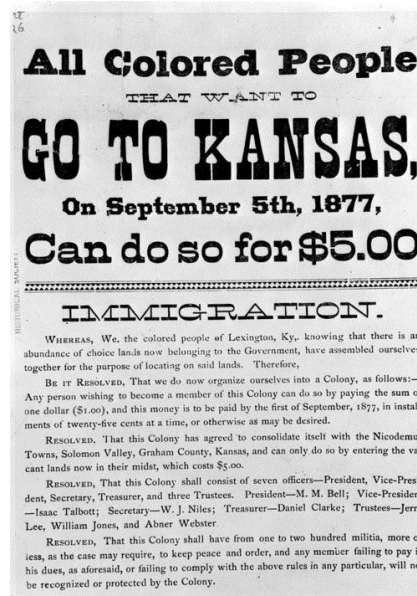
Many African Americans sought freedom and opportunity far from the South after post-Civil War Reconstruction failed to provide the promise of equality. An exodus of formerly enslaved people moved north or west with the hope of a better life, property ownership, and equality.

The story of John Brown fighting the tyranny of slavery and the acceptance of Kansas as a free state made it a migration destination for formerly enslaved African Americans. Many settled in Topeka, forming neighborhoods such as Tennessee Town, the Bottom, and Ritchie's Addition. However, others just used Topeka as a stepping stone for settlements further west.

Seven individuals formed the Nicodemus Town Company on April 18, 1877 to promote Nicodemus as an African American community on the western Kansas prairie. Many of the members of the Nicodemus Town Company were from Kentucky, so naturally, Kentucky was the focus of their recruitment for future settlers.

By September of 1877, over 300 African American settlers from Lexington Kentucky approached the western Kansas prairie with the hope of a better future. In the spring of 1878, two smaller groups arrived from Georgetown, Kentucky.

The first group experienced tremendous hardship. The grasslands of western Kansas produced an environment that was completely alien to the settlers from Kentucky. There were few trees so they



A poster encouraging African Americans in Lexington, Kentucky to move to Nicodemus, Kansas

built sod homes from the dug out ground of the prairie. Most of the settlers had little to no wealth so they could not buy basic supplies necessary for survival.

“When we got in sight of Nicodemus, the men shouted. ‘There is Nicodemus!’ ... My husband pointed out various smokes coming out of the ground and said, ‘That is Nicodemus.’ The families lived in dugouts. We landed and once again struck tents. The scenery time was not at all inviting, and I began to cry.”

—Williana Hickman.

Few settlers brought horses to help plow the fields to farm the land and only three horses survived the first winter. The

settlers survived the winter with the help of Native Americans from the Osage and Potawatomi tribe, who provided them with food and basic supplies.

Despite the initial setbacks of the first settlers, the town began to prosper, growing to over 600 residents by 1878. Nicodemus even competed for the Graham County seat but lost to neighboring Hill City.

Agriculture was the main industry of Nicodemus so the economy depended on the success of a plentiful harvest. Eventually churches, groceries, a hotel, and bank were established in Nicodemus but the future of Nicodemus depended on securing access to the railroad.

The town passed a bond issue that produced \$16,000.00 to subsidize the development of a railroad through Nicodemus. Despite local support and funding, a railroad never made it to Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was destined to follow the same fate of most western towns that never received a railroad line. The businesses moved to towns closer to the railroad and much of the population followed.

Despite the significant drop in population, Nicodemus remained a cultural center with its annual Emancipation Day celebration. During the later summer days at the end of July, ancestors of the citizens of

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## From the Superintendent

New Year's is a time for reflection and a time to count blessings. This year, I am thankful for the quality and the character of the men and women who work at Brown v. Board of Education NHS. Having worked at parks all over the United States, I am continually delighted at the high caliber of our park staff. They know they play an important role in helping to tell the story of civil rights and are crucial to the success of this park.

As I write this, Topeka is recovering from a winter snow storm. Today, I was greeted by snow free sidewalks. Our maintenance staff had come in over the holiday to make sure that the snow would not have the chance to melt and ice up. They didn't have to come in over the holiday, but they did it because they cared and wanted to make sure visitors could safely get into the building.

When I sat down at my desk, I received a copy of the final visitation numbers for 2012. In the last twelve months, we have seen a 50% increase in the number of students visiting the park as well as the highest overall park visitation since Brown opened for business in 2004. The efforts of park ranger Joan Wilson and education specialist Angela Estep are truly paying off – we are connecting students with a story that is meaningful and empowering. Teachers know that we offer a product that helps them reach students in a way that can change lives.

Not a week goes by that I don't receive an email, a call, or a comment card describing how our park interpreters – Aaron and Randy – have helped a family, a local resident, or a school group better connect to the park story. Thom Rosenblum, our park historian, has become a trusted resource throughout eastern Kansas, helping historical societies, schools, and countless others. All of these things are made possible due to an amazing support crew. Cheryl, our information specialist has moved the park light years, connecting us to social media for the first time and making the park truly meaningful to a digital generation. Our administrative personnel, Kathrine and Lydia, are amazing in their attention to detail and thoroughness, allowing the rest of the park staff to focus on serving visitors.

This all leads me to some of the new faces you will be seeing at the park in the New Year. Katrina is a recently returned military veteran who, although new to the National Park Service, has already inspired both her coworkers and visitors with her professional-ism. Nick and Clayton return to park with new skills and insight. All three are a joy to work with. Whether you see them at a local school interacting with students, at the information desk, or in the galleries, know that they are excited to be here and are thrilled to share the story of Brown v Board with you.

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# Three New Faces Offer New Insight to the Park

Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site is experiencing an exciting shake up in staffing resulting in some beloved members of the staff moving on to new challenges, while other staff members are helping out other parks across the nation. Three seasonal staff members have been brought in to help fill the void left by those individuals.

Brown v. Board of Education NHS is happy to welcome Clayton, Katrina, and Nick into the fold. "We are very pleased to have these new folks coming in and offering such a wide variety of talents to our park," said Superintendent Dave Smith. They immediately jumped into a number of projects, working hard to help the park offer even more programs to a wide assortment of groups that will pique the interest of people from all walks of life, ranging from educational programs, to local event coordination, to web affiliated projects.

All three are here for the winter season extending to May. They are excited to have the opportunity to help share the story of the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* with visitors and school groups alike. Both Nick and Clayton have worked at the park before as student employees, before moving on to other jobs.

Nick worked as a park ranger at Rock Creek Park for a season and then he worked at the US Capitol Visitor Center for close to

two years. When asked about being a part of the National Park Service, Nick said, "Being a park ranger is the greatest job in the world. I meet new people everyday and I get to work with people who are passionate about their job."

Clayton is just coming back from a summer seasonal job at Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota. When asked about coming back to the park, Clayton said, "The story here at *Brown v. Board of Education* is so dynamic, and it ties into so many different current and historical events, it is wonderful. There is always a new angle to look at the impact of this landmark case."

Katrina has a military background and enthusiastically said of the park, "I love working in a place where a legacy comes alive. *Brown v. Board of Education* is not a case for the history books, it's a history in the making of our lives today. Anytime you sit in a classroom, stand in line at the grocery store, share a table at a coffee shop, you can look to your left and right and see an Asian American, Mexican American, an African American or maybe even walk in to a meeting with the CEO of a company and it be an African American female. We are living the legacy, not just reading it in history books."

Clayton, Katrina, and Nick look forward to greeting visitors as they come in to experience all that Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site has to offer.



From left to right: Nick Murray, Katrina Fraise, and Clayton Calder.

# Keeping America Beautiful

The National Park Service helps protect the nation's most important landscapes, monuments and historical sites. The NPS protects those sites by maintaining buildings, forests, mountain ranges, grasslands, coastlines and other geographical features. However, the NPS cannot protect the parks and trails on their own. It takes individual effort by visitors and neighbors to help protect these sites.

Park Ranger Randy Standingwater volunteers his time to maintain a segment of the Landon Trail, a bike and pedestrian trail, that runs in front of Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. Ranger Randy contributes his time to Keep America Beautiful, an organization dedicated to cleaning up litter and protecting the environment. He keeps litter and other waste from damaging the natural beauty of the trail and also keeps the waste from entering a nearby creek that is part of the Kansas River watershed. It is individual



**Park Ranger Randy Standingwater does his part to keep America beautiful. You can help too!**

effort displayed by Ranger Randy that helps protect the natural and historical resources that are part of the National Park Service.

You can help protect the park by disposing of your trash in the numerous trash receptacles inside and outside the park. When you visit other National Park sites, you can help maintain the natural beauty or historical value of the site by limiting

disposable waste. For example, you can take a reusable water bottle instead of a disposable water bottle with you as you hike a trail. Additionally, you can help maintain the integrity of the site by staying on designated trails and pathways. After thousands, if not millions, of visitors walk through historic buildings or hiking trails, the National Park Service has to do regular maintenance to keep those sites from falling into disrepair. Visitors can damage the site by traveling beyond the designated pathways. Therefore, do your part to keep the National Park Service and America beautiful by disposing of any waste that you bring to the site into trash receptacles and by staying on designated pathways.

You can also volunteer for the National Park Service or other organizations, like Keep America Beautiful, to help maintain trails so that everyone, including future generations, can enjoy the wonders of the National Park Service.

## Events

### February

- ❖ 21: **Evolution of Jazz.** Dennis Winslett, Director of Education at the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, will highlight the Jazz Age, music of the Gatsby period, and the evolution of jazz.
- ❖ 23: 7-8:30 p.m. **From Race Records to Rock & Roll.** Dancers from the Kansas Ballet Academy will teach visitors how to dance for a 1950's era sock hop with live band. Visitors are encouraged to dress in period clothing.

### March

- ❖ 2: **Bessie Blues with Queen Bey** Live performance 7 p.m. at the Topeka Library
- ❖ 22: **Naturalization Ceremony-** 10:30 a.m. Witness a great milestone as numerous individuals become American citizens.
- ❖ 25 & 26: **Sparky & Rhonda Storytelling:** Sparky and Rhonda are available to visit schools in the local commuting area to share tales of the struggle for civil rights through storytelling and music. Schools that are interested in hosting a session of the free performance can contact Angela Estep at 785-354-4273 or [angela\\_estep@nps.gov](mailto:angela_estep@nps.gov)

## Technology Opens New Doors at Brown v. Board of Education NHS

Brown v. Board of Education NHS offers new ways to reach out to visitors and become more accessible by using more technology that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has to offer. A new Facebook page [www.facebook.com/brownvboardnps](https://www.facebook.com/brownvboardnps) and distance learning programs through the internet make the park more accessible and interactive with the public. These technology based tools offer new opportunities to help share the story of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The Facebook page allows the park to discuss current events that deal with the legacy of the case, remind followers of upcoming events, discuss important dates in history, and keep in touch with the wants and needs of people in the community. The park posts regularly on the site and followers are encouraged to interact with the park through Facebook.

Park Ranger Clayton Calder says, "We are trying to interact and reach those people who might use Facebook as a way of scouting out what to do in Kansas before they take a trip, or stay active with the people in our area who want to know what we are up to. It is a lot of fun finding new things to post and seeing our followers' reaction to the posts."

The distance learning program allows the park to interact with classrooms across the world by using video conferencing technology to give programs to classes. The park staff can actively give presentations, participate in class discussions and answer students' questions without even leaving the park. If you are interested in setting up a distance learning opportunity, simply call (785) 354-4273 or contact the park through the official website, [www.nps.gov/brvb](http://www.nps.gov/brvb), for more information.

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## Superintendent (Continued)

Additionally, be on the lookout for new park volunteers Joanne and Ben. Joanne brings decades of experience as an educator to the park while Ben is a recent graduate of Kansas State University and brings his skills as an interpreter to the park. Both are welcome additions to our park family.

Yes, I am very thankful to be able to work with such an amazing group of individuals. But when you think about, the story of *Brown v. Board of Education* is equally amazing. It seems reasonable that we should have a park staff to match.

David Smith  
Superintendent

# Preserving Your Investment

The staff at Brown v. Board of Education NHS takes great pride in helping to preserve and protect one of the iconic symbols of the fight for Civil Rights – the former Monroe Elementary School. The terrazzo tiles that line the hallways are lovingly waxed by a diligent maintenance crew, the plaster walls are blemish free and protected from any potential marring, and the grounds are trimmed regularly to maintain this internationally known symbol in the battle against segregation.

Although staff has been able to keep up with the normal wear and tear of an 80-year old building, some significant structural flaws recently threatened the continued existence of the structure.

Within the last few years, park staff noticed water seeping down through the building's outer walls. After working with historical architects and structural engineers, they discovered water was consistently pooling in the roof area above the

auditorium. This water would then in turn get under the building's limestone cap, slowly trickling down into the interior of the building.

In order to limit the damage, park facility manager Treva Harris worked with a local Topeka contractor to install a thin rubber membrane across the surface of the roof to prevent further damage. The membrane worked perfectly but this was an obvious temporary fix.

Beginning this fall, contractors began performing the structural work that eliminates the pooling problem. The original rain scuppers and water collectors on the top of drain spouts were far too small to accommodate the amount of rain water that collects off of the terracotta sloped roofs. These have since been replaced, allowing for water to effectively drain. Contractors will make the final corrections this spring once the temperatures rise enough to allow the mortar to dry adequately.

## Nicodemus (continued)

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Nicodemus return for a homecoming to celebrate the unique history and heritage of Nicodemus.

The former Monroe Elementary school, now *Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site* maintains a great relationship with Nicodemus as a story of African American migration out of the South. Ritchie's Addition is a neighborhood directly south of downtown Topeka where many African Americans settled following the Civil War.

John Ritchie owned the area that became known as the Ritchie's Addition. Ritchie's house still exists today and is located only blocks away from the national historic site.

Ritchie was an abolitionist who sold his land at a reduced price or gave it away to

formerly enslaved African Americans. The demand for educating the children who migrated to the area increased as more and more African American families settled in the area. The Topeka Board of Education established the first Monroe school in 1870.

Eventually, two different Monroe schools were built to serve the community. The last Monroe school, and current national historic site, completed in 1927. The community in Ritchie's Addition took pride in their school and ensured the students had the same educational opportunities as the white schools in Topeka.

Without the assistance of the abolitionist John Ritchie, the African American community in Ritchie's Addition, and the Monroe school would not be here today.